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SUBJECT: KARBALA'S PREPARATIONS FOR PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

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¶1. (SBU) PRT members met with the Government Elections Officer (GEO) on November 6 and the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) Representative on November 9 to discuss preparations for the provincial elections, expected to be on January 31. The GEO believed that Karbala was on track for increased party participation and high voter turnout. The UNAMI representative expressed concerns that poorer voters, upset at the lack of government services, may view the elections as irrelevant. Iraqi Security Forces and municipal authorities are still making plans for election day security and voter transportation, each of which will affect voter turnout. End summary.

¶2. (U) Karbala GEO Safa Ibrahim told us that 67 lists (slates of candidates) had been registered in the province by the November 3 deadline, representing nearly 1,000 candidates. Safa said that 37 of these lists are Karbala-based political entities, representing independents and local small parties, while others represent national entities.

Voter Registration and Outreach

¶3. (U) Safa believed there were no problems with voter registration in Karbala. He said that Karbala voter rolls now include 518,000 people, up from 214,000 just prior to the 2005 elections. On voter education, Safa said the GEO was developing a media plan that will disseminate information on the electoral process and educate voters using sample ballots. The lists will be identified by specific numbers ahead of time, making it easier for candidates on a given list to campaign.

¶4. (SBU) Sheikh Ali Kamonah, the UNAMI representative (and former Governor of Karbala) said that UNAMI, supported by federal officials and NGOs, had sponsored 180 voter education workshops at the qadaa (district) and nahiyah (subdistrict) levels. He said that a UN-sponsored conference on voter education had been planned in order to reach influential leaders (including tribal leaders), but was canceled due to the lack of an elections law. Kamonah believed the conference would be rescheduled but did not give a date.

¶5. (SBU) Kamonah was concerned that "simple people" who had participated in the 2005 elections but were frustrated at the lack of improvement in services, would view the 2009 elections as irrelevant and sit them out. He said a significant drop in voter participation, particularly among the lower classes, "would be a disaster."

Election Day Security and Transportation

¶6. (SBU) On polling day, according to Safa, the city will give extra permits to allow an increase in bus traffic. he

said the number of polling stations is roughly the same as in 2005 (218) and they are mostly in schools. However, Kamonah said that in 2005 some government-provided buses used to transport voters to the polls were used only to service particular neighborhoods. Kamonah said if a curfew and extra security requirements are imposed on election day (as they were in 2005) these will create additional barriers to turnout. He believed that increased security, coupled with the unfamiliar "open list" system, would create long waits at the polling stations and a big disincentive to vote.

CROCKER